

New life FOR A LACOMBE

Lacombe's flatiron building has stood at a crossroads in the town's main street for almost 100 years. Once run down and desperately needing repair, the grand old structure was recently restored and reopened to the public as an interpretive centre showcasing the history of the community. For the people who live in Lacombe or choose to visit the town, located about 120 km south of Edmonton, the flatiron building is not only a reminder of Alberta's vibrant past, but also a symbol of hope for the future.

The triangular building, which is shaped like an old-fashioned flatiron, is one of only two designated historic flatiron buildings in the entire province of Alberta and the oldest of three such structures in western Canada. Situated on a triangular block created in 1891 when the railway line cut through the heart of the town's main street, this three-storey building has withstood two major fires that destroyed much of the main street of the town in the early 1900s; seen the marching of troops during two World Wars; and watched the town swell from a population of under 1,000 to the current population of nearly 10,000.

To the residents of Lacombe, it is a symbol of the town itself—unique, sophisticated, and timeless. But the citizens of Lacombe are not alone when it comes to identifying themselves with their flatiron building. One of the most beloved buildings in New York City is an historic flatiron building that was also one of the first skyscrapers erected there. When asked by Morley Safer what it was like to be a legend, Katherine Hepburn once replied that it was like being some grand old building that people pass by and look up to. When asked which grand old building best typified her, she unhesitatingly replied that it would have to be New York City's flatiron building. While Lacombe residents and New Yorkers are a world apart on many things, their beloved flatiron buildings are common symbols that tie them together.

The Merchant's Bank of Canada built Lacombe's flatiron building at a cost of \$30,000 in 1904 using the classic Beaux Arts style of architecture that was popular between 1885 and 1920. This eclectic neoclassical style of architecture combines ancient Greek and Roman forms with Renaissance ideas to create highly

ornamented masonry buildings. The exterior of the building is composed of brick and sandstone with an intricate cornice along the upper edge of the building and a scalloped hood over the main entrance. Inside, giant columns run through the second and third stories of the building to the covered plaster ceilings that are still intact.

Glen and Laurie Calkins and Jim and Brenda Hargreaves, Lacombe entrepreneurs, purchased the historic building in December of 2001 for \$165,000 and restored it in 2002 at a cost in excess of \$400,000. Alberta Community Development through the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation contributed \$77,000 in grant monies to aid in the restoration, along with valuable preservation expertise for the building, which was identified as a Provincial Historic Resource in 1990. "Lacombe has one of the best preserved historic downtown areas in the province and the flatiron building contributes to the historic character of the streetscape. The unique design of the building makes it historically significant," says Gerry Ward, registrar of Alberta's historic places. "We are fortunate to have two very good examples of the unique flatiron design that have been provincially designated in the province — one in Lacombe and one in Edmonton."

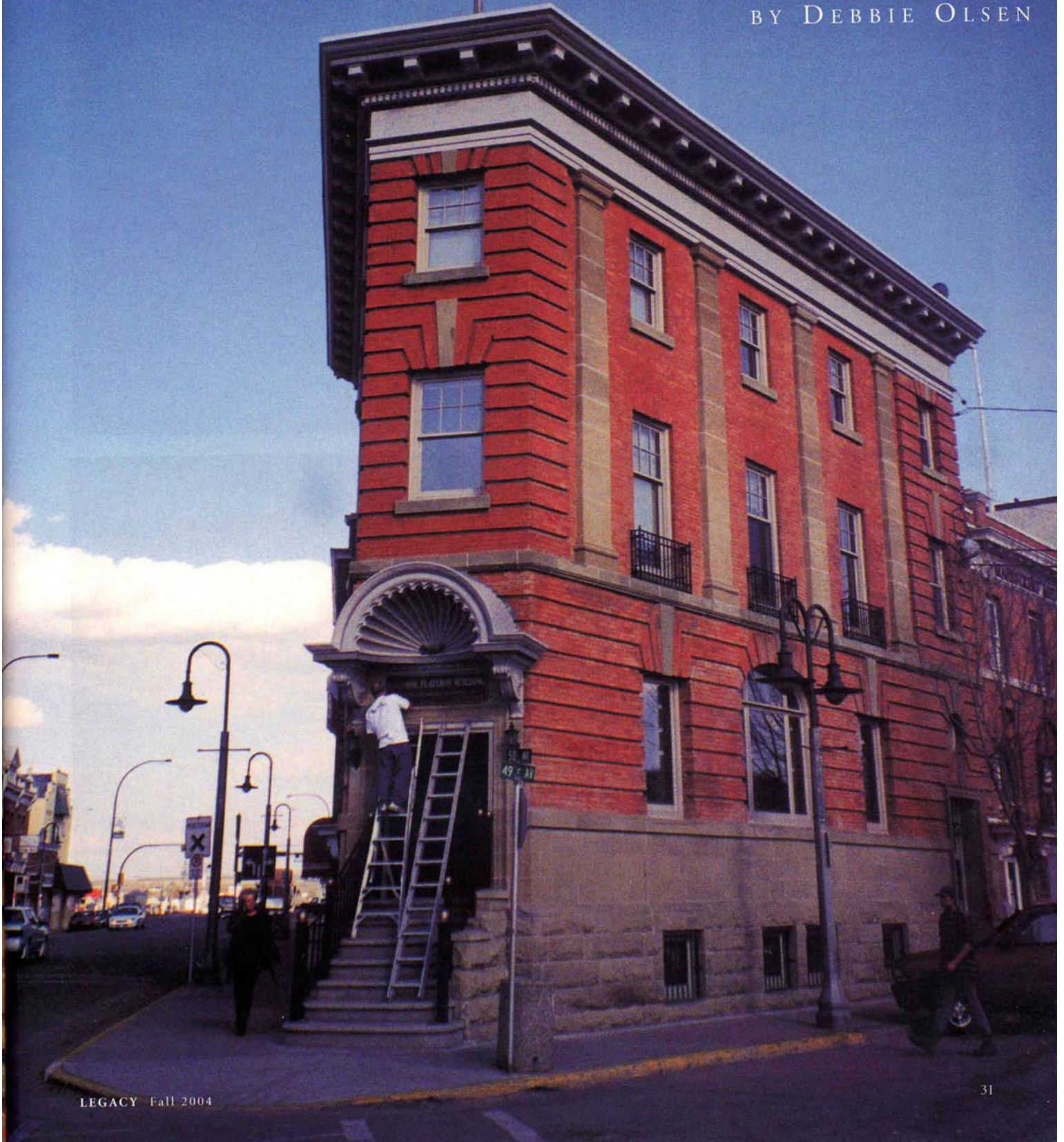
The restoration proved to be a challenging undertaking for the new owners who hired architect David Murray to help ensure that every exterior detail was authentically replicated. About \$200,000 went into the restoration of the exterior brick, sandstone, decorative trims, and windows and another \$200,000 went into the interior renovation, which was overseen by Peter Bouwsema, of PJB Design Consultants. "We wanted to do this project right—not only for the town,



Authentic restoration took hours of work inside and out.

LANDMARK

BY DEBBIE OLSEN





The distinctive scalloped hood over the main entrance has always impressed visitors to the building.

but we felt we owed it to the building,” says co-owner Glen Calkins.

The top floor of the building was traditionally used as an apartment, while the other floors were used for office space. Today, the top floor is still apartment space, the second level is office space, and the main floor and basement of the building house a unique interpretive centre. “We see the new interpretive centre as a hub for the town’s tourism,” explains Calkins. “Visitors can tour the interpretive centre, then do a walking tour of the main

street, historic homes, blacksmith shop, and the Michener House Museum.”

The idea of making the lower two floors an interpretive centre came after the renovations on the building had already begun. People were curious about the building and the new owners realized that some sort of public use would really fit the space. After learning that the local historical society had an enormous collection of photographs and other items, but no place to display them, the owners decided that the flatiron building would be an ideal location for an interpretive centre. A group of volunteers came together to make it happen. The building now houses historic photos and displays as well as a small theatre that shows a short film showcasing the history of the town. To see the film and tour the displays is to learn about life on the Alberta prairies at the turn of the century.

The creation of the interpretive centre was achieved through the cooperation of numerous volunteers, corporate and private donations, and funding from two levels of government. Funding for the staffing and

creation of displays came from a \$40,000 grant from Alberta’s Community Initiatives Program, local donations, and an \$18,000 contribution from the Town of Lacombe.

“More than 1,000 volunteer hours went into organizing and creating the displays in the interpretive centre,” says Denise Sumner, president of the Maskipitoun Historical Society, which is responsible for the operation of the Interpretive Centre, the Blacksmith shop, Michener House Museum, and the Community Archives in Lacombe. “The flatiron building is important architecturally, historically, and aesthetically to the town. It’s an impressive building that stands for Lacombe and shows the strength and longevity of the community.”

The flatiron building has long been Lacombe’s most sophisticated and elegant structure and with this restoration, people hope that this grand old building will stand another century or more as a much-loved symbol of Lacombe and Alberta. ☀

Debbie Olsen is a freelance writer in Lacombe.

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